

A round-up of the latest hot debates and shared advice from the Communicators' Network

DRIVING UP SURVEY RESPONSE RATES

How to raise employee survey response rates is a common dilemma. Find out what solutions are working for members of the CommsNetwork, shared in a recent discussion on the topic. Other issues covered recently include developing the team briefing process and naming a reward and recognition program.

Q: Does anyone have any ideas on how to increase responses to an annual survey? For example, what's better; web-based or paper?

A: Julie Baron
Communication Works

Here are some quick tips to help you with your survey project:

1. Don't go with online vs. hard copy. Do your best to show both sets of employees [those with computer access and those without] that you'll do what it takes to get their important feedback. When needed, I use a combination of electronic and hard copy or telephone interviews to get feedback.
2. Don't only share the results but take it one step further and let people know what actions are being taken and provide progress updates on those actions. This is where I find most companies fail.
3. Get middle management involved in the communication process, specifically the results and action sharing. Research shows that staff find their direct managers most believable and want to hear from them more.

A: Sandy Manners
Siemens Westinghouse

We do a large 70-question employee opinion survey every one/two years. Our employee base of some 750-1,400 employees (depending on the year) is made up of salaried workers (who use

computers) and a unionized factory workforce (most of whom do not have access to a computer).

We've successfully increased our participation rate from 63 percent in 2000, to 95 percent in 2004.

Here are the secrets of our success:

- Although we could use an electronic version of the survey, we don't. We like the control that a hard copy gives us. Results from other locations that used electronic surveys were not nearly as good as ours. No matter how many reminders you send out, employees have to be motivated to fill in a survey. Electronic is impersonal. If an employee chooses not to do it, no one knows.
- We personalize the outer envelope of the survey with each employee's name along with the coding required. That way we can track that everyone actually received a questionnaire.
- We run a communication campaign before the new survey goes out. We review some of the findings from the previous survey and remind people of the changes taking place as a result.
- We make sure our senior management team communicates to supervisors the importance of this effort and the expectation that all employees participate.
- Part of the reason for our outstanding results was the fact that the participation rate was included on our balanced scorecard and, therefore, became part of our incentive program. Although the participation rate was only targeted at 80 percent, everyone was so motivated, we exceeded the target by a wide margin. (Managers even delivered survey questionnaires to employees'

homes if they were off ill.)

- We asked the union to co-sign a letter with management encouraging employees to make their opinions known by completing the survey.
- Each department held a special meeting in which managers/supervisors explained the purpose of the survey and gave people time to complete it.
- Completed surveys were returned in sealed envelopes to protect anonymity.
- During the time the survey was run, I published a report each week tracking participation rates. Managers started to panic if they saw other departments hitting 100 percent participation if they weren't there yet.
- I published the participation rate in our employee newsletter so employees could also see the ongoing return rate.
- Finally, we published a thank-you note to employees for the incredible participation rate.

Q: How can I develop our team briefing process, i.e. keep it fresh, make sure it happens and that it happens effectively?

A: Angela Sinickas, Sinickas Communications, Inc.

The evolution I'm seeing is changing team briefings from a "broadcast" method to an interpretive one. Many companies are using electronic and print vehicles to get consistent information out to all employees at a single time, with a follow-up discussion with supervisors on what part of the information is most relevant to the work group and what, if anything, they need to do differently to implement the new information.

This approach can actually encourage more discussions with supervisors if your broadcast information ends with: "Ask your supervisor for more information on how this may affect your work group." This gives employees permission to request information if the supervisor hasn't scheduled regular meetings for a while. When enough employees ask for more information individually, supervisors start conducting meetings out of "self-defense" because it takes less time.

On communication audit surveys, I often see the largest current reliance on other employees (rumors, grapevine) is in companies where they've tried to make team briefings a major source of new information. Companies with more focus on mass broadcasting methods have virtually no rumor mill on key company subjects.

A: Kate Hogben British American Tobacco

In BAT Australia we developed a team briefing process called "Team Talk." It's been running successfully for four years and has evolved over time to reflect changing business and information needs. The whole process is managed online on the company intranet – this automation allows for a degree of transparency and for tracking and evaluation of the process.

In terms of content of team briefings, it's important to recognize that the cascade is no substitute for regular, ongoing communication between leaders and their teams. In other words, the agenda cannot encapsulate all information needs.

We structure our "core brief" around business performance including a monthly scorecard against key performance measures and bonus criteria. This ensures line of sight with business priorities.

To keep it relevant, the process

allows for an additional "local brief" that's developed by the team briefer to customize and make items relevant for their team/function/department.

In each briefing, time is allocated for discussion and questions to ensure the brief is interactive. Q&As are captured online, archived and made searchable.

In terms of effectiveness, core brief dates are planned and published a year in advance so briefers can schedule their meetings ahead of time. The rule is "same time, every time – no cancellations."

Evaluation is conducted collectively by each team after the briefing and completed online. We measure the relevance of the information (on a sliding scale) and the integrity of the process (i.e. attendance levels and timely completion). A reporting tool collates the results and again these are shared online. The transparency of the process acts as an incentive to leaders to do their part.

In terms of continuous improvement, the hardest part of the cascade process is sustaining the commitment of senior managers. To address the issue, the most recent evolution has involved:

- Reducing the number of team briefers to a committed core group.
- Introducing collective briefings between the top team (board members) and this core team to ensure key messages are discussed, understood and tested prior to the main cascade.
- Moving the monthly brief to bi-monthly to avoid information becoming stale and to allow for a more detailed presentation and discussion of a few core themes.

We also do quite a bit in terms of developing communication competencies to support senior managers in the cascade process, a topic for another discussion!

Q: We're about to launch a reward and recognition initiative. Can anyone suggest a catchy name for the program?

A: Judy Jones, The New York Times Company

Every audience is different, but my instinct is to be careful of "catchy" names. This is people's money and, typically, they don't like anyone fooling around with it.

The recognition part can have a catchy title, but the name should associate with the behavior you want people to model.

I can give you an example of what happens when it doesn't. A financial services firm I consulted with many years ago had what it called its Star Program. Employees who "won" would receive a cash spot award and get their pictures pasted on a star that would be displayed in the cafeteria.

But no employee knew why they got the award and other employees didn't know how to work towards getting the recognition. Everyone assumed it was political and winners just rotated around.

In fact, the management was sincere in trying to recognize good workers. However, there wasn't linkage between behavior and the award – and the name of the program didn't help. scm

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